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ABSTRACT

The influence of institutional culture on the selection of college presidents was investigated at three Catholic colleges sponsored by women's religious communities. The concepts of institutional saga and culture were used to describe the dynamics at work in presidential selection. The constant comparative method and triangulation (i.e., using multiple data sources to verify findings) were used to analyze institutional data that included transcripts from taped interviews, field notes, and copies of documents. While all three colleges used the same rational search committee process, the dynamics of the search were determined by institutional values, key institutional events, and the attitude of the college community toward the incumbent. At one of the colleges, where institutional culture was very strong, the presidential search was direct and straightforward. Another college that had a moderately strong culture also had an uncomplicated search. The weak culture of the remaining college meant there was no unified perception of the institution or the qualities of the leader that was needed. In the three cases, the general strength of the culture affected the clarity and focus of the search process. (SW)

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The Influence of Institutional Culture on Presidential Selection

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This paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the San Diego Hilton in San Diego, California, February 14-17, 1987. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

The Influence of Institutional Culture on Presidential Selection

The purpose of this research was to understand how institutional culture affects the selection of college presidents. The concepts of institutional saga and culture are used to describe the dymanics at work in presidential selection at three case study institutions. Triangulation and the constant comparative method were used to analyze institutional data which included (1) transcripts from taped interviews, (2) field notes, and (3) copies of documents. While all three colleges used the same rational search committee process, the dynamics of the search were determined by (1) institutional values, (2) key institutional events, and (3) the attitude of the college community toward the incumbent. Analysis of institutional culture is an important dimension for explaining presidential selection.

Objectives

The purpose of this research was to understand how institutional culture affects the selection of college presidents. This study sought to identify institutional characteristics and centers of influence which lead to particular patterns of outcomes in the selection of presidents at three institutions.

Perspectives

The concept of institutional culture is described by a number of authors writing on higher education and for broader audiences. In applying the concept of culture to colleges and universities, Burton Clark (1971) has used the term institutional saga. He defines the institutional saga as "a unified set of publicly expressed beliefs about the formal group that (a) is rooted in history, (b) claims unique accomplishment, and (c) is held with sentiment by the group" (1975, p. 99). The important phases of the saga for Clark are initiation and fulfillment. Pettigrew (1979) also takes a longitudinal view of culture and relates it to the actions of the founder and the amalgam of beliefs, ideology, language, ritual and myth.

Recently, corporate cultures have also been the focus of attention for a number of authors including Deal and Kennedy (1982), Peters and Waterman (1982) and Schein (1985). Both Deal and Kennedy (1982) and Peters and Waterman (1982) assert that the strength of organizational culture, that is the values and belief systems that characterize the organization, plays an important role in determining the success of the organization. Schein (1985) suggests that the relationship between culture and organizational activities is a complex one. He indicates that culture both shapes and is shaped by leaders and other members of the organization. Masland (1985) and Dill (1982) have focused on colleges and universities and believe that culture influences the managerial style and decision practices in these institutions.

Since the president is not simply the chief administrator of a college or university but the symbolic embodiment of the institution (Kauffman, 1980 and Kerr, 1984), the occasion of choosing a president is an ideal time to examine the institutional culture. Presidential selection is an extremely crucial process (Nason, 1984) in which the elements of history, mission, power, control, and institutional characteristics interact to influence the selection and thus affect the future of the college or university.

Methods

After conducting a survey of 40 Catholic colleges which had chosen presidents between 1982 and 1985, three of these institutions which are sponsored by women's religious communities were selected as case study sites. Site visits of at least eight days were conducted at each institution. Techniques of semi-structured and unstructured interviews, observation, and document analysis were used to explore the culture and the search process.

Data was analyzed using qualitative methods suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (1982) and Lofland (1971). Transcripts from all semi-structured interviews, notes from all observations and unstructured interviews, and all pertinent document material were divided into small units each dealing with one piece of information. The major task was then to code each element of data according to coding categories. The process of establishing coding categories had three time frames: at the outset of the study, during the process of the case studies, and during the formal analysis of the data after the site visits.

The constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used to identify the relationships between the culture and the selection process. Data incidents were categorized and recategorized until theoretial properties of the category emerged.

Triangulation (Denzin, 1970) increased the reliability of the findings by using multiple data sources to verify findings.

Data Sources

The three colleges studied are Catholic institutions sponsored by communities of women religious. They are located in the East and Midwest, have enrollments of between 1000 and 2200 students, had balanced operating budgets at least two of the past three years, and had constant or increasing student enrollments.

The qualitative data analyzed consisted of three bodies of material: (1) transcripts from all taped interviews, (2) field notes from the informal interviews and from observations, and (3) copies of documents and notes taken from documents.

The taped interviews were conducted with key persons in each institution including: search committee members, sponsoring body leaders, the chair of the board, and the president. Many other interviews were conducted informally with members of the college community. Observations included a wide range of incidents from the physical aspects of the grounds and buildings to formal and informal events. The documents which were examined included but were not limited to: search committee minutes, college catalogues, mission statements, minutes of board of trustees meetings, president's annual reports, self-studies for accreditation, and college histories.

In the analysis of the data, a number of categories helped to identify important attributes of the institutional culture. Some of these categories were: key events, heroes, programs, students, symbols, and relations with the sponsoring religious body (SRB). Based on examples given by Clark (1971, 1975), Pettigrew (1979), Deal and Kennedy (1982), and Masland (1985), the distinction was also made between strong well focused cultures and those which exhibited lack of continuity or showed discrepencies and were therefore weak.

In analysis of the searches, some of the categories which emerged were: priorities, influential persons or groups, key issues, and frustrations. The final phase of analysis was to explore the links which existed between the dynamics of the search and the saga and values of the institution. College A was obsessed with the process of the search because of an earlier unilateral presidential appointment. College B had a search marred by conflict related to conflicts over the mission of the college. The search at College C was dominated by concerns for fund raising generated by the financial crisis which dominated its saga.

Results

Each of the institutions studied has a distinctive institutional culture which is the product of its history and contemporary circumstances. College A has the strongest, clearest culture and is closely tied to its SRB. Its Catholic, women's, liberal arts, traditional image is clear and permeates the campus. It is residential and somewhat parochial with loyal alumnae and a stable faculty. Because it is small and has been stable in location and mission, its style is distinctive. It possesses three of the four criteria which Clark (1980) identifies in a strong culture: small size, integration and age. The institutional heroes come from the ranks of the SRB. A traumatic presidential appointment in 1972 percipitated the reorganization of all governance structures.

College B has a weak culture because of its lack of continuity and integration caused by changes in mission, programs and clientele. It does possess some of the attributes Clark (1980) identifies in strong cultures. The small size of the institution and its long history, closely identified with the SRB and local community, contribute to its saga. Its Catholicism is liberal, humanistic and ecumenical; and at times it has emphasized its Christianity to the exclusion of its Catholicism. It has a commitment to egalitarian and participatory

governance. College B is being pulled in many directions at the same time, and its recent past is eclectic. The existence of divisive factions and rapid diversification work against a cohesive culture.

The institutional culture of College C is moderately strong despite the fact that it is not rooted in age and tradition. Its culture is cohesive because of its small size, its integration and its crisis of re-birth at a new location during the 1960s. The heroes of College C come from the ranks of the faculty who were instrumental in its re-birth. The struggle to survive financially, to attract a new clientele, and to redefine its governance in relation to the SRB have contributed to its saga and sense of achievement. College C is vital and vibrant but it is not rooted in tradition and its appeal is to the practical rather than the aesthetic.

The structure and process of presidential selection are based on a rational model and there is a great deal of uniformity across instituions. Institutional culture, on the other hand, affects the dynamics and particular characteristics of the search. In the three cases studied, almost all of the significant dynamics in the search process were linked in some way to the institutional culture. Whether the culture is strong or weak, it has an influence on the search process and the final selection.

In College A, where the institutional culture is very strong, the search was direct and straightforward. The values of a traditional, Catholic, liberal arts education, as symbolized by the SRB, are clear and generally accepted by most constituents. An SRB president, educated in the liberal arts and with over 20 years of service at the institution, is a clear embodiment of the values of College A.

Besides values, key institutional events also influence the presidential selection process. These events can be understood as a part of the institution-

al saga. For College A, turmoil surrounding the presidential appointment of 1972 changed not only the way presidents are selected, but the governance structure of the institution.

College B, on the other hand, has a weak culture which manifested itself in the factious nature of the search committee. There was no unified perception of the institution or the qualities of the leader that it needed. Some members of the College B community are grounded in the traditional values of the institution. College B had been committed to the fine and liberal arts, women's education, liberal Catholicism and egalitarianism. With declines in enrollment and the consequent shift in programs and clientele, these values no longer constitute a shared ideology. The arts had to make room for professional programs, and men as well as women are now to be educated. Some believed the college was so ecumenical that it was no longer Catholic. Finally, the structures which maximize participation and seek consensus are not effective in dealing with crisis. College B has no shared value system, and the selection of a president definitely meant that some values "won" and others "lost."

At College B, a board of trustees' decision in 1979 to accept male students and to emphasize five professional programs is a key event which captures the conflicts of mission and direction which characterize College B. This is not to imply that these decisions were wrong, for without them continued enrollment declines may have led to the college's dissolution. These 1979 decisions do, however, symbolize the division which exists there.

College C, which has a moderately strong culture, had an uncomplicated search. There may have been disagreements on particulars, but the committee members had a common perception of the institution and the qualities it needed in a leader.

Traumatic events which occurred at College C during the late 1960s marked its re-birth as a new and different institution from its female academy prede-

cessor. The concerns over finances and the core of faculty who have served at the institution since those days of re-birth are two important forces in College C's saga and the 1982-83 presidential search. Specifically, there was a preoccupation with presidential candidates who could assure financial stability through successful fund raising.

In these three cases, the general strength of the culture affected the clarity and focus of the search process. Some of the most important components of the institutional culture which emerged are shared values and the key events in the institutional saga.

Any study uncovers interesting results which are unrelated to the initial purpose. In this case, an element which became part of all of the presidential searches was the influence of the incumbent president. In none of the three institutions was there an effort on the part of the incumbent to choose her successor, but rather the attitude of the college community toward the incumbent affected the search. The incumbents' strengths were taken for granted and their weaknesses became an issue in the search. At College A, a terminal degree became an absolutely necessary credential because the incumbent felt handicapped without one. College B forgot that decisive presidential leadership had eliminated an operating deficit and reversed enrollment declines, and it chose to seek a unifier. The administrative and management skills of the incumbent at College C were hardly mentioned as the committee sought a fund raiser. While the administration of the incumbent is not the prime influence on the search process, who the president is and how he or she is perceived by the college community does have a bearing on the qualities which are sought in the successor.

Conclusions

In these three case studies, almost all of the significant dynamics in the search process are linked in some way to the institutional culture. Any issue which became significant in the presidential search was grounded in the institutional saga, values and culture. Understanding the institutional culture does not enable simple prediction of the next president, nor is it clear whether there is a relationship between the strength of the culture and the fit between the president and the institution. However, understanding the culture does facilitate certain kinds of assumptions. Not only do the by-laws of College A mandate an SRB president, but the whole reality of the institution mandates such a choice. The ambiguity of mission and image at College B could hardly produce a simple, non-controversial search. College C could not be expected to choose an academic philosopher, but rather to focus on the practicality of fund raising. Institutional culture does have a profound effect upon the selection of the president, but the influence is not such that it lends itself to developing a predictive model.

A number of other important questions remain to be answered in future research. After a new president is selected, how influential is the culture in determining "fit" and effectiveness? Other studies should focus on the relation of the culture to decision making, resource allocation, distribution of power, and so forth.

Importance of the Study

An important contribution of this study is the connection it reveals between the institutional culture and presidential selection. In the three institutions studied, the real dynamics of presidential selection were neither random nor rational, but were strongly influenced by the culture of the institution. The significant event of presidential selection was not determined by rational deliberation but by underlying institutional values.

On the practical level, it would be helpful for boards of trustees and search committees to examine the institutional culture before they embark on the process of selecting a president. In the study of organizations, an analysis of culture should be added to the rational, bureaucratic and political models which are currently used.

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